

Freeing Themselves: Puritanism, Slavery, and Black Abolitionists in Massachusetts, 1641-
1788

By
Christopher Alain Cameron

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History

Chapel Hill
2008

Approved By

Advisor: Heather Williams

Reader: Laurie Maffly-Kipp

Reader: Lloyd Kramer

ABSTRACT

Christopher Alain Cameron: Freeing Themselves: Puritanism, Slavery, and Black
Abolitionists in Massachusetts, 1641-1788
(Under the direction of Heather Williams)

While the available scholarship on the northern antislavery movement focuses primarily on abolitionist committees composed of whites, this thesis argues that in Massachusetts African Americans played a central role in the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the state. In the early colonial period Puritan religious ideology and the ministers who espoused it influenced the establishment of an institution of slavery that contained the seeds of its own demise. During the 1770s and 1780s Massachusetts blacks availed themselves of their right to petition and bring suits in court, in addition to building organizations, producing literature, and writing essays aimed at undermining proslavery ideology. They effectively harnessed the discourse of Christianity to build a community and influence white abolitionists' antislavery arguments, assisting in the struggle to free themselves and other blacks from the shackles of slavery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people contributed to the completion of this project. I would like to thank my advisor, Heather Williams, for her invaluable advice, attention to detail, and time spent reading and commenting on this paper in its many forms. I would also like to thank Laurie-Maffly-Kipp and Lloyd Kramer for respectively introducing me to the joy of studying religious and intellectual history, their willingness to serve on my committee, and the comments they gave me that have made this a stronger study.

I would like to further thank some of my undergraduate professors at Keene State College. Joseph Witkowski and Vincent Ferlini chose me to serve as a teaching assistant for their math courses, which were important experiences when deciding to become a college professor. Matthew Crocker's course on the Early American Republic ignited a passion for history that has remained strong to the present. Many thanks to him for recognizing my potential and pushing me so hard to improve my writing. My undergraduate advisor, Gregory Knouff, similarly provided excellent criticism and invaluable support over my last two years of college. When I was struggling to come up with an idea for the title of my senior paper, he suggested "something catchy like Freeing Themselves."

I received generous support from the McNair Graduate Opportunity Fellowship as an undergraduate, which allowed me to develop this project and funded presentations of my work at two conferences. Special thanks to Antonio Henley and Amanda Powell of the McNair Program for helping me realize what I really wanted out of a career and encouraging

me to apply to graduate school. At the University of North Carolina I have also received funding from the Royster Society of Fellows, which has been invaluable for travel and research expenses. My fellow graduate students at UNC, especially Katy Smith, Jennifer Donnally, and Eliot Spencer, have provided inspiration and excellent comments on this paper in its various forms. Many thanks for the time they put into reading my work and the critiques that pushed me to work that much harder.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family. Alain and Lynn Cameron opened up their home during a key research trip. My grandparents, Gisele and Real Cameron did likewise. Many thanks also to my siblings, and most of all my mother, Sylvie Cameron, for keeping me grounded and always being there for me. I could not have done this without their love and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PURITANISM AND SLAVERY.....	10
ORGANIZED BLACK ABOLITIONISM.....	22
ABOLITIONIST WRITERS.....	35
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE.....	52
CONCLUSION.....	58
WORKS CITED.....	60

INTRODUCTION

In February 1788, the captain of a vessel in the Boston Harbor lured three black men onto his ship, likely by promising them jobs on board. Once the men, all of whom were free members of Boston's African Masonic Lodge, were on board, the captain sailed for Martinique, selling the kidnapped blacks as slaves in the French colony. This kidnapping of black men, a not uncommon occurrence, spurred the leadership of Boston's black community into action. Prince Hall, head of the African Masonic Lodge, presented another in a long line of petitions from blacks to the Massachusetts legislature on 27 February 1788. The petitioners asked what "are our lives and Lebeties [*sic*] worth if they may be taken a way in shuch a cruel & unjust manner as these?" They called for the abolition of the slave trade in the state of Massachusetts because of the cruelty it inflicted on Africans and the hypocrisy it engendered in whites who "call themselves Christians." Although the Superior Court of Massachusetts had abolished slavery five years earlier, merchants participating in the Atlantic slave trade had continued to remove blacks from the state.¹

While African Americans were not the only ones to denounce this act of kidnapping, their protests were certainly influential. The prominent historian and abolitionist Jeremy Belknap, an acquaintance of Prince Hall, argued this petition helped initiate the debate in the

¹ Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, March 9, 1788, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th ser., 3 (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1877): 25-6; "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 27 February 1788," in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, Volume I: From the Colonial Times Through the Civil War* ed. Herbert Aptheker (1951; New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 20-1.

Massachusetts legislature on a bill to prevent the state's citizens from outfitting slave ships. The representatives passed the law on 26 March 1788, just twenty-seven days after Hall and other blacks presented their petition. The law called for stiff penalties for all who engaged in the slave trade, and included provisions for recovering damages for kidnappers' victims.²

Hall's petition and the subsequent prohibition against Massachusetts citizens participating in the slave trade represented both a victory for blacks in their efforts to overthrow slavery and the slave trade in the Bay State, and a turning point for black political life in Massachusetts. Since before the American Revolution, Massachusetts blacks had engaged in political activity aimed at freeing themselves and slaves in other colonies, and at prohibiting the importation of slaves into America. They presented petitions, published essays in newspapers, formed institutions, and produced literature aimed at improving their lives. As seen in the above petition, much of the fuel for blacks' arguments came from the rhetoric of Christianity, a powerful discourse African Americans employed to speak to whites in a language with which they were exceedingly familiar. As scholars have pointed out, the language of Christianity was an important tool in bolstering support for the American Revolution, and blacks adopted a similar rhetoric to fight against slavery.³ Black political activity, with its reliance on religious argument, played a direct role in the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in Massachusetts.

Yet these actions have gone largely unnoticed by historians of abolition, black intellectual history, or religion and politics during colonial and revolutionary America. In the first definitive study of the northern antislavery movement, Arthur Zilversmit claimed that

² Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, March 9, 1788; Introduction to "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 27 February 1788," 20.

³ The scholarship on this subject is vast, but see esp. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

"the history of the early abolitionist movement is essentially the record of Quaker antislavery activities," a claim which effectively excludes African Americans, none of whom belonged to the Society of Friends or were allowed to participate in abolitionist organizations that Quakers ran in the eighteenth century.⁴ While Zilversmit's study focused primarily on Quakers' antislavery activities in the American North, the scholarship of David Brion Davis has examined the foundations of antislavery ideology throughout the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution. Despite the magisterial sweep of Davis's seminal works, he slights the importance of black antislavery ideology, not even deigning to mention their contributions to the movement at all.⁵

Historians who have focused on the political activity of black abolitionists have centered their attention primarily on the years after 1830. This is due to a misconception among historians such as Benjamin Quarles, Herbert Aptheker, and Patrick Newman that early black abolitionists were too conservative in their approach and did not have a significant impact on achieving abolition. These scholars argue that most black abolitionists after 1830 were more radical because they called for an immediate end to slavery as opposed to gradual abolition. Yet this definition of radicalism is no longer adequate. For a people who were primarily poor, uneducated, and the victims of slavery, any form of political activity can be seen as radical. Furthermore, my study of black politics in Massachusetts

⁴ Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 55.

⁵ See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975); *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

demonstrates that a number of blacks did indeed desire and call for the immediate abolition of slavery.⁶

Even as there has been an increasing amount of scholarship on nineteenth century black abolitionists, there remains a dearth of literature on black intellectual history. In recent years historians Mia Bay and Patrick Rael have made important contributions to this field. Bay's work examines the racial ideology of African Americans toward whites in the period from 1830 to 1925, partly because she sees a lack of sources for this topic in the earlier period. Patrick Rael's work has a smaller chronological focus, examining identity building in black communities between 1820 and 1860. In this thesis I hope to complement these important additions to the field by examining not only the political activity of black abolitionists in the eighteenth century, but the ideological origins of their political thought.⁷

In Massachusetts, these ideological origins lie primarily in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Puritan religious thought, which shaped both the religious beliefs and political activity of black abolitionists in the late eighteenth century. Only John Saillant has made the connection between Puritanism and black politics in his study of black abolitionist Lemuel Haynes. Studies of Puritanism as a whole and biographies of early eighteenth century

⁶ See Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974); Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Herbert Aptheker, *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁷ Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Puritan leaders such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Willard do not touch on the implications of Puritan thought and the system of slavery it set up for later black abolitionists.⁸

Similar to the work on Puritanism, the available scholarship on religion and politics in colonial and revolutionary America deals primarily with white religious and political figures. Scholars such as Alan Heimert, Nathan Hatch, and Patricia Bonomi have shown the many ways in which ministers and religious ideology played a central role in the politics of revolutionary America. This connection is generally traced to the events and theology arising from the Great Awakening. What is missing from all of these scholars' work is an examination of how religion shaped black political ideology in revolutionary America.⁹

I want to address these gaps in the historiography by arguing that there was indeed a significant African American presence in the early antislavery movement in Massachusetts, a presence whose origins lie in Puritan ideology and the particular system of slavery that this religious ideology shaped in Massachusetts. Furthermore, I argue that the political activity of black abolitionists was central in effecting the abolition of slavery and the slave trade within

⁸ For Haynes, see John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); For Puritanism as a system, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939); Harry Stout's more recent study of New England preaching devotes one page to the relationship between white revolutionary ideology and abolition, but does not touch on blacks; see *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 314-315. For Willard, see Ernest Benson Lowrie, *The Shape of the Puritan Mind: The Thought of Samuel Willard* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974). Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1979), 233-4 has a brief discussion of Mather's justification of social hierarchies but does not deal with his thoughts on slavery and the prevalence of those throughout colonial Massachusetts. Another biographer of Mather's, Kenneth Silverman discusses the fact that Mather owned slaves and felt they should be treated well, but does not examine Mather's specific views on the institution. See his *Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 263-4. Lastly, Robert Middlekauff's *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) is completely silent on Mather's views on slavery and their influence on treatment of slaves in colonial Massachusetts.

⁹ See Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the American Revolution*; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977).

late eighteenth century Massachusetts. Lastly, while more research is needed on this topic, my thesis suggests that the importance of Christianity to slaves in the eighteenth century North was greater than scholars have realized. Much of the available scholarship on slave religion has focused on southern slaves in the antebellum period. Albert Raboteau argued that the Great Awakening did see a massive rise in conversions to Christianity among urban slaves, but it was not until the 1830s and 1840s that rural slaves began to convert en masse. Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood's more recent examination of slave religion similarly argued that Christianity did not firmly take root among slaves until the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, and like Raboteau they focus on the American South. William Piersen's work on the development of an Afro-American subculture in eighteenth century New England incorporates a discussion of religion but argues that the First Great Awakening of the 1740s was a lost opportunity because most blacks did not convert to Christianity. My examination of church records in Boston and the political discourse black abolitionists employed indicates that Christianity was indeed central to the lives of blacks in the Bay State. Many blacks attended church, whether or not they became members, and the discourse of Christianity was ever present in their daily lives.¹⁰

I use the terms "abolitionist movement" and "antislavery movement" interchangeably. To distinguish between the two, scholars of British antislavery generally refer to eighteenth-century abolitionism as the movement to end the slave trade, and nineteenth-century antislavery as the movement to end slavery. Historians studying the

¹⁰ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 127-53; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), Chs. 5-6; William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), Chs. 7-8.

American antislavery movement, however, generally use the terms interchangeably, with some preferring the term abolitionist for the proponents of immediate abolition after 1830.¹¹ I follow the pattern of scholars of the American antislavery movement; however, I do not use the term abolitionist only for proponents of immediate abolition after 1830 because I argue that a number of blacks in the eighteenth century were also immediatists.

I refer to abolitionists as any individuals who engaged in antislavery politics. Antislavery politics comprised a number of activities, many of which historians have not considered political, but all of which helped undermine slavery. By examining the political nature of activities such as writing poetry and antislavery essays, preaching sermons, petitioning, running away from and suing slaveholders, and organizing black institutions, scholars can now recognize many people heretofore excluded from the category of abolitionist.

I borrow my definition of politics from Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet*. Here Hahn defines politics as collective struggles for socially meaningful power. Furthermore, he asserts that politics must be defined in its specific historical context, thus I treat the actions of black abolitionists in this study as political if they aimed at gaining socially meaningful power. Considering the fact that some scholars have argued that slavery engendered a type of social death, it seems that nothing could be more socially meaningful for a slave than to become free. Furthermore, situating my analysis within the context of the eighteenth century, a time when most black people were still slaves, allows me to argue for the radicalism of the political activity in which blacks engaged. Although some of this political activity was aimed at securing relief from taxes and gaining equal educational

¹¹ See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 21-2.

opportunities, the overwhelming focus of black political thought and activity in this era was geared towards the abolition of slavery.¹²

In addition to the work of Hahn, my argument relies on the work of Michel Foucault, specifically his *History of Sexuality*. In this work Foucault discusses the creation of what he terms discourses of "perversity," such as that surrounding homosexuality. He argues that this discourse "made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf...often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically qualified."¹³ The application to Massachusetts is fairly straightforward. Puritan slaveholders employed the rhetoric of Christianity to justify their system of slavery, often saying that slavery was God's means of bringing Christianity to Africans. Furthermore, they forced blacks to go to church and sanctioned black participation in religious organizations which could easily take on a political bent. When blacks did start to organize politically, they turned the very discourse meant to subjugate them on their masters, pointing to the hypocrisy of Christians holding other Christians as slaves, warning of God's impending judgments on America, and using the very tools given to them, such as literacy, to gain their freedom. As Foucault writes, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it."¹⁴ His work provides a useful framework for explaining the ideological origins of black abolitionism, revealing the ironic twist that the institution of slavery took in

¹² Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3. For social death, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 52-64.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume I* (New York: Random House Inc., 1978), 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

Massachusetts, with the justifications for slavery making it possible for blacks to thwart the institution by using much of the same language.

I begin with an examination of the context out of which black thinkers and activists arose. This context was Puritan, slaveholding, Massachusetts, and it is important to understand the ideas on slavery of some of the Puritan leaders when examining how blacks in this state were able to accomplish what their brethren in other locales were not. Thus, the first section examines the development of slavery in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century, the specific laws and practices outlined in the legal system and in the thought of prominent intellectuals on the question of slavery. Here I argue that, paradoxically, organized black abolitionism in Massachusetts arose out of the liberty that white Puritans gave slaves to form communities and educate themselves for the purposes of conversion. Subsequent sections trace the development of an organized abolitionist movement among blacks, the ideas of two black writers of the 1770s, and the challenges that blacks developed to bring about the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the state.

PURITANISM AND SLAVERY

Puritans implicitly accepted slavery from the inception of their “errand into the wilderness.” Even before arriving on land, Governor John Winthrop gave a sermon in 1630 aboard the *Arbella*, entitled *A Model of Christian Charity*, in which he told fellow settlers seeking refuge in America: “God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean and in subjection.”¹⁵ Winthrop’s words demonstrate early Puritans’ belief in “natural” social hierarchies based on the divine will. His sermon is also an early model for the dichotomy in American thought that asserted this nation was to be a beacon of light and a shining example to others, while keeping certain peoples in subjection. As it turned out, those to be the most mean and in subjection in Winthrop’s colony would be Indians and Africans.

White Massachusetts residents began enslaving Indians after the Pequot War of 1637, sending fifteen boys and two girls to Bermuda on the slave ship *Desire* in July 1637. This ship, which belonged to one Mr. Pierce, returned from the West Indies seven months later, bearing ““some cotton, and tobacco, and negroes,”” according to Winthrop.¹⁶ There were

¹⁵ John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity* in *Reading the American Past: Selected Historical Documents, Volume 1: To 1877*, ed. Michael Johnson (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 56.

¹⁶ George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 5.

many more voyages of this kind in the ensuing years as colonial authorities in 1639 commented on the growing number of blacks in the state, and travelers from the 1640s to the 1660s noticed the growing familiarity of Massachusetts residents with slavery. In 1644, merchants in Boston commenced the African slave trade, outfitting three ships for sail in an attempt to cut out the West Indian middle man.¹⁷

In 1641 Massachusetts Bay officially authorized slavery by law. Part of the *Body of Liberties*, passed by the legislature of the colony in 1641, reads,

There shall never be any bond slaverie, villinage or captivitie amongst us unless it be lawfull captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israell concerning such persons doth morally require.¹⁸

Although the letter of the law said slaves must be lawful captives, this language was simply a justification for whites exploiting the labor of blacks. In a letter to his brother-in-law Governor John Winthrop, Emmanuel Downing expressed his wish for another Indian war, saying "If upon a Just warre the lord should deliver them into our hands, wee might easily have men woemen and Children enough to exchange for Moores." Downing wrote to Winthrop that he did not believe the new colony could thrive without a sufficient stock of slaves. In the letter he also claimed that slavery was a much more profitable system of labor than indentured servitude, telling Winthrop, "I suppose you know verie well how wee shall maynteyne 20 Moores cheaper then one English servant."¹⁹

¹⁷ Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942; New York: Atheneum, 1971), 20; Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery*, 5-8.

¹⁸ Ibid, 12-13.

¹⁹ "Emmanuel Downing to John Winthrop," in *Winthrop Papers, Volume V: 1645-1649* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1947), 38.

From the early years of settlement in Massachusetts, slaves were used for a variety of purposes. Initially, they helped develop the economic infrastructure by clearing land, building barns, breaking up soil, building docks, and making roads. The Puritan fear of idleness mandated that slaves work at least twelve hours a day, yet the ability of the master determined the pace of work because he usually labored side by side with servants and slaves. Until the era of the American Revolution most residents of Massachusetts earned their living by farming, thus many slaves were employed in agricultural work. However, whites also used black slaves as domestic workers, and in the coastal regions a number of blacks worked in the shipping industry, either aboard ships or as ship joiners, carpenters, and rope makers. Other slaves worked as blacksmiths, caulkers, bakers, shoemakers, and tailors.²⁰

The various occupations in which masters could employ slaves makes it easy to discern why slavery quickly became part of the New England economic system, yet despite the profitability of the institution, Puritan-influenced law attempted to allow slaves the liberties and rights of Christians as outlined in the Bible. The 1641 *Body of Liberties* provided, "Every man whether Inhabitant or foreigner, free or not free shall have libertie to come to any publique Court...and either by speech or writeing to move any lawfull, seasonable, and materiall question, or to present any necessary motion, complaint, petition."²¹ This meant in essence that Puritans recognized the humanity of slaves and gave them rights that colonies such as South Carolina summarily denied them. One of the reasons for this was likely the smaller slave population in Massachusetts, a colony which contained

²⁰ Lawrence William Towner, *A Good Master Well Served: Masters and Servants in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620-1750* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 103-113.

²¹ "A Coppie of the Liberties of the Massachusetts Collonie in New England," Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 3rd ser., 8 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1843), 218.

virtually no blacks at the time this law was passed. While Puritans did not write these laws to help Africans fight slavery, by employing their right to use the courts and petition the government, blacks were able to exploit the tension that existed in Puritan thinking between holding slaves while at the same time recognizing their status as people and Christians.²²

In Massachusetts religion also shaped an institution of slavery that enabled a number of slaves to challenge the institution by teaching them how to read, write, and form communities within churches. This access to literacy and a church community resulted from the views of prominent Puritan clergymen who argued slaves should be treated as if they were part of the family. One of the most prominent clergymen who insisted that slaves were an integral part of larger religious and familial institutions was Cotton Mather.

Mather was one of the most well-known and respected men of his era. He was born on 12 February 1663, entered Harvard at the age of eleven years, and was ordained in Boston's Second Congregational Church in 1685, with Samuel Willard assisting in the imposition of hands ceremony. Cotton Mather began his ministry as assistant to his father Increase Mather, took charge of the congregation when Increase left for England in 1688, and remained the head pastor until his death in 1728. During his tenure at the Second Congregational Church, Mather became the most prolific writer of his era on theological issues and was recognized for scientific achievements by the Royal Society of London, of which he became a member in 1714.²³ Mather was certainly not an abolitionist as he owned slaves for much of his adult life. Like Winthrop and other Puritans, Mather accepted the

²² Scott Hancock, *The Law Will Make You Smart: Legal Consciousness, Rights Rhetoric, and African American Identity Formation in Massachusetts, 1641-1855* Ph.D Dissertation, University of New Hampshire, 1999, 3, 21-9.

²³ Kenneth Silverman, *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 5-45, 254.

notion that gradations in society were natural and necessary. One of his biographers wrote that Mather “viewed class structures as though the world were simply a gigantic monastery without walls, a school of obedience to God, to be learned by careful subservience to superiors or responsible management of inferiors.”²⁴ An integral part of this responsible management of inferiors was the conversion and education of slaves. In a number of writings, including his personal diary and published sermons and tracts on the subject, Mather elucidated his views towards the institution of slavery and the duties owed to both slaves and free blacks by masters and ministers.

On 13 November 1698, Mather recorded: “This Day, I baptized four Negro’s; and the Lord helped mee, to make this Action, a special Occasion of my glorifying Him: especially, with what I then spoke unto the rest of that Nation.”²⁵ In his diary entry of 13 October 1706, Mather noted receiving a slave as a gift from his congregation, an occurrence which was quite common in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. According to Mather, this gift was “a mighty Smile of Heaven” on his family. He named the slave Onesimus and determined that, with God’s help, he “would use the best Endeavors to make him a Servant of Christ.”²⁶ In naming his slave Onesimus, Mather likened himself to the apostle Paul, who, in a letter to Philemon, indicated that he had befriended his slave Onesimus while imprisoned, and the two had grown so close that Paul considered the slave to be like a son to him. Paul advised Philemon to receive the slave “not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother

²⁴ Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1979), 233-4.

²⁵ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume I: 1681-1709* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957), 278.

²⁶ Ibid, 579; Slaveholding among the New England clergy was fairly common. Between 1717 and 1783, about 118 Harvard educated New England ministers held more than 200 slaves. See Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 196.

beloved.”²⁷ Like Paul, Mather viewed all slaves as potential brothers in Christ, giving him a sense of obligation to his slaves as a master, and to the free blacks in his congregation, as a minister. However, Mather’s diary also indicates that he viewed slavery as an institution sanctioned by God in that he accepted a slave from his parishioners and attributed their kindness to God smiling down upon him. While many of his writings and sermons discussed his understanding of the slaveholders’ obligations to blacks, he never meant his work to be used as fuel for blacks’ attack on the institution.

Among the obligations Mather felt as a minister was not only to nominally convert slaves and free blacks, but to truly instruct them in the knowledge of God. He noted in May 1718 : “I have a Number of black Sheep in my Flock, which it is time for me again, to send for; and pray with them, and preach to them, and enquire into their Conduct, and encourage them, in the ways of Piety.”²⁸ In a later entry Mather discussed a school that he started in 1693 and maintained for many years at his own expense to teach blacks reading and religion.

Mather’s public writings reflected many of the ideas he explored in his diary. In 1696 he published *A Good Master Well Served*, a tract of about fifty pages that he originally preached as a sermon in his Second Congregational Church. Mather began the tract like any other sermon, with a grounding of his ideas in scripture. Among the texts he singled out as most germane was Ephesians 6:5-8, an oft used verse enjoining servants to “be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”²⁹ The last verse was especially important to Mather’s thought

²⁷ Philemon 1:10, 16. KJV

²⁸ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume II: 1709-1724* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957), 532.

²⁹ Ephesians 6:5 KJV.

because Ephesians 6:9 reminded owners that they also had a master in heaven, thus they had important obligations towards their slaves that God would look either favorably or unfavorably upon them for fulfilling.

In Mather's view, the first of such duties that masters owed their servants was to make sure they themselves were not servants of Satan because only those who obeyed God were fit to command servants. Mather then indicated how he believed slavery to be a family institution, writing, "masters indeed should be Fathers unto their Servants."³⁰ Mather reminded masters that they could not cause their servants to sin as they were responsible for the souls of those placed under them, nor could they use their servants as beasts of burden. Masters owed their servants discipline, and must take due care to instruct them in the tenets of Christianity, as they would their own children. These injunctions indicate that Mather believed in the importance of treating slaves fairly, at least as far as was practicable without freeing them, bringing slaves into Christian fellowship, and giving them an education.³¹

Mather then outlined some of the duties servants owed to their masters. These included some of the standard injunctions made by ministers regarding honesty, obedience, and diligence. Mather also wrote that if servants saw their master sinning, they should try to either tell them or write to them about what they observed. He further called for servants to pray for their masters in instances such as these. Lastly, Mather reiterated the importance of slave conversion. He quoted from Psalm 68:31, the verse that would become a staple of black political rhetoric in the late eighteenth century, asking "Well then, poor Ethiopians, do you

³⁰ Cotton Mather, *A Good Master Well Served* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1696), 10; Although Mather here referred to servants, at that time in Massachusetts the words servant and slave were used interchangeably, with the recognition that a slave was a servant for life. See Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 333-334.

³¹ Mather, *A Good Master Well Served*, 10-17.

now Stretch out your Hands unto the Lord; even those poor Black Hands of yours, the Lord calleth for them.”³²

Mather published a tract specifically addressing conversion of blacks in 1706. He wrote *The Negro Christianized* because he believed that all who had blacks in their household had an opportunity to engage in “the noblest work, that ever was undertaken among the Children of men,” namely the conversion of the unregenerate.³³ He opened the tract by offering his thoughts on why blacks became slaves in the first place. He speculated that God may have sent slaves to masters in Massachusetts for them to instruct the Africans in Christianity. This process would be a blessing for both master and slave because the slave would receive the benefits of the Gospel, while the master would have an opportunity to gain favor in God’s eyes by working to further His kingdom.

Mather justified the importance of converting slaves to Christianity by citing the biblical commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself and by telling masters: “Thy Negro is thy Neighbor.”³⁴ Those who did not care for the welfare of their slaves, Mather pronounced, were not Christians. He attempted to reassure masters that there were many practical benefits to be gained from converting slaves, arguing that conversion would make slaves happier and more diligent, which would in turn improve the estates of their masters. In this tract Mather also tackled some of the prevailing racial ideologies of the day, one of which claimed that blacks did not have the capacity to reason, and therefore could not be converted. He insisted that blacks’ speech, their daily actions, and their improvement in education showed that they

³² Ibid, 53.

³³ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, The Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 1.

³⁴ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 5.

were clearly reasonable creatures. He believed that blacks could be barbarous, but he qualified this with the statement that the ancestors of Massachusetts residents, the Britons, were once themselves a barbarous people before being introduced to Christianity.³⁵

Mather's ideas concerning slave conversion were carefully thought out and comprehensive. He suggested prayers in the tract that masters could teach to their slaves, and these prayers were geared towards slaves at different levels in their education and piety. Furthermore, Mather developed specific catechisms for masters to teach their slaves, and he had a list of recommended Bible verses for the slaves to learn. He even outlined questions masters should ask their slaves regarding the Ten Commandments.³⁶

In the early eighteenth century Cotton Mather exerted a great amount of influence. Upon his death in 1728, a newspaper proclaimed: "He was perhaps the principal Ornament of this Country, and the greatest scholar that was ever bred in it. But besides his universal Learning; his exalted Piety and extensive Charity, his entertaining Wit, and Singular Goodness of Temper recommended him to all."³⁷ Mather's ideas concerning the utility of slave conversion were likely to have resonated with his own parishioners and the larger public. Both his and other prominent ministers' conception of slaves as neighbors and part of the family were reflected in numerous laws and customs that slaves then exploited to challenge the institution by suing their masters and forming communities engaged in resistance.

³⁵ Ibid, 7-23.

³⁶ Ibid, 32-45.

³⁷ *The New England Weekly Journal* (Boston, MA) 19 February 1728, 2.

Samuel Willard, one of the ministers who assisted in Mather's ordination, was perhaps the one member of the clergy who attained an equal prominence with Mather in this period. Willard served as the minister of Boston's Old South Church from 1678-1707 and as vice president of Harvard from 1701 until his death in 1707. In 1726 his *Compleat Body of Divinity* was published posthumously. In this work, a collection of many of Willard's sermons and writings throughout his career, he considered the nature of servitude and a number of reciprocal duties between masters and slaves. To Willard, the word servant "applied to all such in a Family as are under the Command of a Master."³⁸ While there were differing degrees of servitude, what is important in Willard's conception was that servants were part of the family, thus "there is a Duty of Love which Masters owe to their servants...and the poorest slave hath a right to it."³⁹ This duty of love, according to Willard, meant that masters should watch over both the bodies and souls of their slaves.

One aspect of watching over the bodies of their slaves was masters being just to them. For Willard, being just to slaves meant that no master "hath an Arbitrary Power over his servant, as to life and death."⁴⁰ This power belonged to the civil government alone. Furthermore, masters could not command their slaves to do anything which was either sinful or unlawful. Lastly, in his admonition to servants on their duties, Willard said that they must practice patience and submission at all times, however, if a servant "be injuriously treated, he may make his Orderly application to the Civil Magistrate, whose Duty it is impartially to afford him a redress, upon a clear Proof of it."⁴¹ While Willard's notion and the earlier law

³⁸ Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity...* (Boston: B. Green and S. Kneeland, 1726), 614.

³⁹ Ibid, 614.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 615.

⁴¹ Ibid, 616.

stating slaves should have the same rights as other Christians were most likely conceived to prevent masters from excessively abusing their slaves, blacks capitalized on these privileges to gain recourse to the legal system when they felt they were treated unjustly. These injustices often involved promises of freedom that masters later disallowed for one reason or another.⁴²

One of the first such cases occurred at the beginning of the eighteenth century. John Saffin, a wealthy landowner, agreed in a contract in 1694 to free his slave Adam after seven years. Saffin later rescinded the agreement, and Adam sued his master, winning his freedom in 1703 after a lengthy legal battle. This case was important because it gave Adam his freedom, revealed that slavery in the state was open to challenge, and led to Puritan judge Samuel Sewall's publication of *The Selling of Joseph a Memorial* in 1700. This antislavery tract was the first one published in New England, and while unsuccessful in gaining widespread support for abolition, it outlined a number of arguments against slavery that became important to later abolitionist writers. These included the notion that since blacks were created by God they should enjoy the same liberties as all other men, and a refutation of the argument (employed by people like Mather) that the Christianization of Africans justified enslaving them. Slaves in the state continued to bring freedom suits throughout the eighteenth century, with more than thirty men and women suing for their freedom. Only one of the men who brought a freedom suit lost his case upon appeal.⁴³

⁴² For Willard's career, see George William Dollar, "The Life and Works of the Reverend Samuel Willard (1640-1707)," *Church History* 31 (1962): 232; For Willard's views on slavery, see Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity*... (Boston: B. Green and S. Kneeland, 1726), 615.

⁴³ Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph a Memorial* (Boston, 1700) in *Am I Not a Man and a Brother: The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America, 1688-1788*, ed. Roger Bruns (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977), 10-14; Abner C. Goodell, Jr. "John Saffin and His Slave Adam," *Transactions 1892-94, Vol. I of Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: The Society, 1895), 87-112. Emily

The fact that blacks were able to bring these suits suggests that the rights of foreigners spelled out in the *Body of Liberties* were not empty words, but actual practices that the magistrates followed. Puritans based their legal code on the Old Testament, and the institution of slavery they formed in Massachusetts conformed to a biblical model. This meant that masters had an obligation to instruct their slaves in Christianity by teaching them how to read and by taking them to church. Ministers such as Cotton Mather, although often slaveholders themselves, took great pains in reminding their parishioners of the duties they owed to their servants. The rights granted to slaves in Massachusetts law and the customs developed by slaveholders and reinforced by ministers had unforeseen consequences for those who simply meant to make the institution of slavery conform to what they saw as God's will. Puritan masters of the early eighteenth century unwittingly enabled blacks in developing an organized abolitionist movement in the years to come.

Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," *The New England Quarterly* 75 (2002): 27-28.

ORGANIZED BLACK ABOLITIONISM

One of the ways in which ministers unwittingly aided black political activity was by justifying enslavement on the basis that it brought “heathen” souls to God. Many Puritan slaveholders employed this argument at one point or another, as evidenced in Mather’s writings and Samuel Sewall’s need to refute this claim in his antislavery tract. To say that slavery was God’s way of Christianizing blacks meant that masters had to take blacks to church with them, and participation in church activities provided an important venue for both slave resistance and the formation of communal ties.

The eighteenth century saw a steady increase in black baptisms within Boston churches. These were not confined to infants, as Congregational church records indicate they allowed adults to own the covenant as well. For Puritans, the sacrament of baptism was tied to both conversion and church membership. John Winthrop wrote of the first black woman baptized in the colony in 1641 as “A Negro woman belonging to Rev. Stoughton of Dorchester, Massachusetts, being well approved by divers years of experience for sound knowledge and true godliness.”⁴⁴ In order to qualify for baptism, both black and white adults had to exhibit godliness in the eyes of ministers and knowledge of the scriptures. While a number of ministers exhorted masters to instruct slaves in preparation for baptism, not all did so, thus the number of baptisms probably does not reflect all blacks in Puritan churches as there may have been many who attended but never joined the church formally.

⁴⁴ John Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal, 1630-1649: Volume II* ed. James Kendall Hosmer (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 26.

In Samuel Willard's Old South Church, there are no recorded African baptisms prior to 1717, but twenty were baptized over the next ten years.⁴⁵ The Great Awakening saw a sharper rise in black baptisms in this congregation, with twenty-four receiving the sacrament between 1738 and 1744. Before 1760, the church would baptize twenty-seven more blacks, individuals who would come of age during the time of the American Revolution and the antislavery movement in Massachusetts. Some of these blacks were children of slaves, as in the case of "Toby, of Juno, a negro-woman who belongs to Mrs. Katharine Winthrop," baptized on 17 June 1719. Others were free adult blacks, such as "Maria, a Free-Negro," baptized on 27 May 1727. Others were apparently orphans like "John-William Negro," baptized on 27 November 1757, in which "Scipio and Katharine Negroes" were to take John-William and "engage for his education." This last entry is particularly compelling because it illustrates the point that these churches, although dominated by whites, served as spaces for blacks to develop relationships with one another, and assist each other in endeavors such as education.⁴⁶

Boston's First Congregational Church saw most of its black baptisms before the Great Awakening, thirty-two from 1700 to 1738, with seven more coming from 1741 to 1774. The records for Cotton Mather's Second Congregational Church indicate only five black baptisms before 1716, a number which certainly does not reflect the black presence in his church, as he indicated his baptism of four blacks alone in 1696 and claimed he had a number of "black sheep" in his flock in 1718. From 1716 to 1736, there were 16 more blacks baptized in Mather's church, including his own servant Ezor and Ezor's son Abraham. Trinity Church,

⁴⁵ There are no extant baptismal records for the period between February 1706 and May 1715, thus the actual numbers were probably higher, given Willard's concern with the topic of slavery in his writings.

⁴⁶ Old South Church Records, Microfilm Reel 4, Congregational Library, Boston.

established in 1728, baptized forty-six blacks from 1740 to 1770, while Boston's Brattle Street church outdid even this number. Home church of some of Boston's wealthiest residents, including revolutionary era luminaries John Hancock and John Adams, Brattle Street Church saw twenty-four blacks receive the baptismal sacrament between 1709 and 1736. As at Old South Church, the Great Awakening had a significant impact on bringing Africans into the fold at Brattle Street, as twenty-seven were baptized from 1739 to 1744, and thirty-five more from 1745 to 1770. All told, these five churches baptized over one hundred fifty blacks from 1740 to 1770, a number which attests both to the ever increasing presence of blacks within Puritan churches and the influence that Puritan religious ideology would have on black abolitionists in the revolutionary era.⁴⁷

Within these Puritan churches blacks had ample opportunities to acquire literacy, which became a powerful tool in their fight for freedom. Cotton Mather had helped form a society for the education of blacks in Christianity in 1693, and it was in operation as late as 1744. In his diary, Mather indicated that he had been having meetings with slaves in his neighborhood, and that "a company of poor Negroes, of their own Accord, addressed me, for my Countenance, to a Design which they had, of erecting such a Meeting for the Welfare of their miserable Nation that were servants among us."⁴⁸ Mather's entry demonstrates his commitment to Christianizing blacks, but more importantly, blacks' desire for communion

⁴⁷ Richard D. Pierce, ed. "The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Vol.39* (Boston: The Society, 1961), 101-113; Richard D. Pierce, ed. "The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Vol.40* (Boston: The Society, 1961), 370-425; Second Church Record Book (Vol. 4: Baptisms and Admissions, 1689-1716 and Vol.5: Baptisms and Admissions, 1717-1741), Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Andrew Oliver and James Bishop Peabody, eds., "The Records of Trinity Church, Boston: 1728-1830," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Volume 46* (Boston: The Society, 1982), 524-559; *The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square Boston, With Lists of communicants, Baptisms, Marriages, and Funerals: 1699-1872* (Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 100-187.

⁴⁸ Cotton Mather, *Diary: Volume I*, 176.

with each other within Puritan churches at a time when there were relatively few of them in the colony. The rules of this society were geared towards upholding the institution of slavery, with Rule Eight claiming: “if it be found that any have pretended unto their Owners, that they came unto the Meeting, when they were otherwise and elsewhere employ’d, we will faithfully inform their owners.” This rule, and others, were written by Mather and adopted by the blacks to secure his endorsement.⁴⁹

While the purpose of this society was moral instruction, the fact that Mather felt the need to explicitly protect the institution of slavery suggests an awareness on his part that blacks could use these group meetings as a pretext for engaging in political activity aimed at undermining slavery. By the time of the American Revolution, whites increasingly feared these gatherings of African Americans. On 7 June 1771 for example, white members of the Old South Church in Boston, Willard’s former church, convened to discuss such meetings by blacks. The committee reported: “Whereas Danger is apprehended from the Slaves that are frequently left in the meeting house after the public worship is over- Voted that the sexton make diligent search on the Lord’s day Evening...to see if any slaves are left in the house.”⁵⁰ The slaves found lingering in the church were to be taken back to the Sexton’s house, where their owners could pay a fine to retrieve them. This example illustrates three important points. First, slaves were clearly meeting or staying after church by themselves, in this congregation at least. Second, slaves, and presumably free blacks, were not trusted by whites and had good reason to want their own autonomous organizations where they would not be under the watchful eyes of others. Lastly, these meetings, earlier encouraged by ministers like Mather, were now to be feared. This fear likely stemmed from the increasing number of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Old South Church and Congregation Records (vol.1, 1768-1802), Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

blacks in the colony and within churches, especially educated blacks like Phillis Wheatley, who became a member of the Old South Church in August 1771. It is possible, too, that authorities in Boston felt the colonists' conflicts with the British would inspire slaves to subvert their masters' authority.⁵¹

This fear was well founded as just three years before the committee report in Old South Church, a captain in the British army was arrested for attempting to stir up a rebellion of sorts among Boston slaves. Captain William, while drunk, encountered a number of blacks walking in Boston, and asked them if their masters were Liberty Boys, those engaged in resistance against taxation by the British Parliament. The blacks gave the captain different answers, to which he replied that they should go home, cut their masters' throats, and then come to him for protection. Captain William further told the men he would make them soldiers, foreshadowing Lord Dunmore's policy of 1775, in which the Royal Governor of Virginia offered freedom to slaves who would fight for the British. While nothing came of this incident as far as a slave rebellion, it does illustrate why Massachusetts' authorities would have become wary of allowing slaves to gather together amongst themselves. The initiation of black petition drives just five years after this incident would have further exacerbated the feeling among whites that blacks were attempting to undermine the institution of slavery.⁵²

⁵¹ For growth of black population from 1754 to 1764, see Appendices C and F in Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 339-343, 347; For Wheatley's membership in the congregation see Old South Church Records, Microfilm Reel 4, Congregational Library, Boston.

⁵² Joshua Henshaw to Col. William Henshaw, 2 November 1768, "Hugh Hall Papers," Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. For Dunmore's policy towards slaves, see Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), Ch.2.

On 6 January 1773 Massachusetts slaves submitted the first of four petitions to the legislature requesting their release from bondage. The slaves, only one of whom signed his name, began by saying:

We desire to bless God, who loves Mankind, who sent his son to die for their salvation, and who is no respecter of persons; that he hath lately put it into the Hearts of Multitudes on both sides of the Water, to bear our Burthens, some of whom are Men of great Note and Influence.⁵³

The petitioners indicated they were aware that God influenced people in both Britain and America to plead their cause, possibly referring to the Somerset decision of 1772, a court case which abolished slavery in England, and the antislavery agitation of figures such as Quakers John Woolman and Anthony Benezet. Knowledge of the Somerset case and antislavery activity by whites was important to slaves during the revolutionary period, as many enslaved people identified their cause with that of the British and fought for freedom with them.⁵⁴ Those who chose not to cast their lot with the British, such as this group of petitioners, used the knowledge of challenges to slavery to buttress their own arguments against the institution, hoping slaveholders would realize the hypocrisy, and possible danger, of keeping slaves.

This 1773 “humble PETITION of many slaves,” evinces an awareness of trans-Atlantic antislavery politics and of the religious arguments against slavery used by both blacks and whites in their abolitionist writings, speeches, and sermons. By starting the petition with a blessing to God and writing that He is “no respecter of persons,” the

⁵³ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 6 January 1773,” in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, Volume I: From the Colonial Times Through the Civil War* ed. Herbert Aptheker (1951; New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 6.

⁵⁴ For Somerset see Steven M. Wise, *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial That Led to the End of Human Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005); For blacks during the Revolution see Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961).

petitioners claimed an equal right to participate in the political and religious discourse of the time. Further, they wrote that although they had no property, children, wives, or country, “we have a Father in Heaven, and we are determined, as far as his Grace shall enable us, and as far as our degraded contemptuous Life will admit, to keep all his Commandments.”⁵⁵ With these few lines the slaves offered a powerful religious critique of the institution. Although Christians, black slaves were robbed of all the benefits of a normal family life. Despite this, however, they were determined to persevere on the Christian path in hopes that masters would realize the hypocrisy of holding Christian slaves while fighting for their own liberty.

The slaves’ religious argument reflects the growing presence of blacks in Puritan churches and their application of the same religious arguments white ministers used to bolster support for freedom from Britain. Although the petitioners did not ask for immediate abolition or engage in violent rebellion, when seen in their historical and religious context their actions take on a significance heretofore unrecognized by many scholars. They demonstrate that there was a community of blacks in Boston at this time dedicated to freedom and willing to risk the wrath of their masters in the cause of abolition. Since most slaves in Massachusetts worked on small farms in close proximity to their masters, took meals with them, and worshipped in the same church, it would have been no easy task to defy the man whom they saw every day. Although historian Lorenzo Greene wrote that “slavery was considerably milder in New England than elsewhere in colonial America,” most slaves in Massachusetts did not have this comparative frame of reference, and like Richard Allen, founder of the first black church in America, considered slavery “a bitter pill.” This feeling on the part of slaves in Massachusetts was probably owing in part to the fact that after the depression following the Seven Years’ War, which ended in 1763, many masters sold

⁵⁵ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 6 January 1773,” 6.

slaves for whom they had no work to do.⁵⁶ The reception of this petition also indicates that petitioning, as well as using the court system, was a right granted even to slaves, and while simply exercising their legal rights may not have been radical, participating in the public sphere and working to undermine the institution of slavery was.

A second petition submitted just four months later in April, 1773 demonstrates an evolving awareness of revolutionary politics on the part of blacks, as well as their resoluteness in airing their cause. The tone of this petition was very much like the first. The petitioners did not demand immediate emancipation, asking instead for the opportunity to purchase their freedom, which “even the *Spaniards*, who have not those sublime ideas of freedom that English men have,” allowed their slaves.⁵⁷ In this petition, the slaves tried to allay whites’ fears of living in both a lawless and multiracial society, saying “we are willing to submit to such regulations and laws, as may be made relative to us, until we leave the province, which we determine to do as soon as we can...procure money to transport ourselves to some part of the Coast of Africa.”⁵⁸ Although the wording in these few lines is comparable to some of the language in the first petition, there are instances in which it is clear that the petitioners were becoming increasingly impatient. The very first paragraph of the petition, before discussion of Spanish practices of slavery, is a bit harsher in the denunciation of the hypocrisy of the colonists. Part of that paragraph reads “we expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to

⁵⁶ Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 218; For masters selling unemployed slaves see Ibid, 122; For Richard Allen’s view of slavery see his *Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Nashville, TN: Legacy Publishing, 1990), 16; For proximity of slaves to their masters see Towner, *A Good Master Well Served*, 89.

⁵⁷ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773,” in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 8.

enslave them....The divine spirit of *freedom*, seems to fire every humane [*sic*] breast on this continent, except such as are bribed to assist in executing this execrable plan.”⁵⁹

Similar to the first petition submitted by Boston’s blacks, these petitioners’ use of the idea that freedom was a gift of the divine spirit again demonstrates their parallel application, along with white revolutionaries, of religious scholar Nathan Hatch’s idea of the sacred cause of liberty. Hatch’s study of the relationship between religion and politics in the revolutionary era argues that freedom became endowed with a sacred aura by ministers in this period, with notions of the millennium shifting to an expectation of a thousand year reign of political freedom. Blacks also accepted the idea that liberty was sacred; however they aimed their rhetoric towards subverting the power of colonial slaveholders because their idea of freedom differed markedly from that of whites.

One way to subvert slaveholders’ power was to organize politically. The last line of this second petition reads: “In behalf of our fellow slaves in this province, and by order of their Committee.”⁶⁰ This wording indicates that black petitioners appropriated both the religious and political discourse of revolutionaries while employing some of the same organizational strategies. When Parliament decided to pay Massachusetts judges out of the royal coffers in December 1772, an action which white colonists perceived as a threat to their liberty, individual towns set up committees of correspondence that served as conduits for political activism, and it is evident that blacks employed similar methods for political organization at the same time. However, they did not have to take their cues solely from white revolutionaries in this arena as they already had a long tradition of forming groups in

⁵⁹“Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773,” 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 8; Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 3-24.

Boston for their mutual education and moral improvement, organizations such as the Society of Negroes Cotton Mather helped form in 1693. It was a short step from belonging to one such group to deciding to submit a petition.⁶¹

The tone of the 1773 petitions, along with the arguments used, underwent a marked transformation within a year, when a 1774 petition of Massachusetts blacks employed an uncompromising stance against slavery. This petition based the claim of slaves to freedom on both natural rights and religion. Demonstrating knowledge of the compact theory of government in its simplest form, the slaves claimed that they had a natural right to freedom, having never entered into an agreement whereby they would have divested themselves of their liberty. They based religious argument against slavery on the Pauline injunction found in Colossians, in which the apostle says: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them."⁶² They said they were unable to practice these commands, and the true Christian religion, because of slavery. Further, they argued that their masters were also unable to practice Christianity, arguing it was impossible for a master to bear his slaves' burden while oppressing them. The petitioners concluded by asking for enactment of a specific law, something the earlier petitions did not do. They said they wanted freedom for themselves and for their children at age twenty-one.

Scholars have commented on the acquiescence in gradual abolition as an argument for the non-radicalism of early black and white abolitionists, with some even saying that the

⁶¹ For the establishment and function of committees of correspondence among whites, see Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 42-3.

⁶² Colossians 3:18-19 KJV.

early antislavery movement was a failure.⁶³ A close reading of the words used in the 1774 petition, however, illustrates that these blacks were not in favor of gradual abolition. The petitioners asked for freedom for themselves without qualification. They wanted freedom for their children when they reached twenty-one years of age. Historian Gary Nash writes that “binding out poor children was a common expedient on both sides of the Atlantic for keeping down the costs of poor relief and inculcating the offspring of the laboring poor with the requisite habits of industry and morality.”⁶⁴ The request of this group of slaves was very different from the later gradual abolition laws, which did not immediately free any slaves. It appears that this group desired their freedom immediately, but had in mind the financial security of their children in a competitive economy, attempting to secure the children training in a useful trade. Although the petition does not specifically mention gaining training for their children, the fact that most of these slaves were in an urban environment makes it likely that they themselves worked in various trades, and some may not have felt they could adequately care for their children immediately, thus “apprenticing” their children would have made sense to them. Evincing an awareness of the economic problems inherent in freeing a large number of slaves and devising alternatives was a useful way to appeal to those who feared losing their property.⁶⁵

While the grammar and spelling of this last appeal suggests it was written by a different person from the first two petitions, it is possible that some of the same slaves were

⁶³ See Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 8-14; Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 2; Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 2-6.

⁶⁴ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 77.

⁶⁵ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 25 May 1774,” in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 8-9; For slave occupations in colonial New England see Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, Chapter 4.

involved in this petition as well as earlier ones. For one, the religious rhetoric employed in this latter petition is similar to earlier ones. In the January 1773 petition the slaves discussed abolitionists willing to “bear our Burthens,” while in the May 1774 petition one of the principal arguments against slavery was the master’s inability to bear the burden of the slaves, who were also Christians. At the very least, the use of similar wording shows the petitioners to be part of a discursive community of slaves and free blacks employing similar types of religious and political arguments to achieve freedom and equality. This community was strongest in Boston, but extended throughout the state as well.

For instance, on 14 June 1775, the Worcester Committee of Correspondence, a quasi-governmental body set up after Parliament’s passage of the Coercive Acts, passed a resolution against slavery after blacks protested their being held in bondage. The resolution, which appeared in the *Massachusetts Spy* one week later, said that “the Negroes in the counties of Bristol and Worcester, the 24th of March last, petitioned the Committees of Correspondence...to assist them in obtaining their freedom.”⁶⁶ The petition of the Worcester blacks prompted the committee to make it known publicly that they “abhor the enslaving of any of the human race, particularly the Negroes of this country.” They promised, in addition, to make any endeavors they could in bringing about the freedom of slaves in Massachusetts.⁶⁷

In addition to black political activity in other areas of Massachusetts, echoes of the arguments used by Cotton Mather when he urged masters to convert their slaves are evident in the early petitions of the Boston blacks. Mather told masters that their “negro” was their

⁶⁶ *The Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester, MA), 21 June 1775, 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

neighbor, thus they must show brotherly love towards their neighbor because, according to the Bible, “God hath made of one Blood, all Nations of men.”⁶⁸ While Mather envisioned his words being used to support the Christianization of blacks, African Americans in the revolutionary era had different ideas, employing his rhetoric in their arguments against the institution of slavery. The petitioners adopted the Puritan tradition of explaining the secular world in religious terms and fusing Christianity with political thought, and this tactic similarly infused the ideological attacks on slavery and racism posed by individual writers of this era.

⁶⁸ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 5.

ABOLITIONIST WRITERS

Two individual black writers, Phillis Wheatley and Caesar Sarter, put their attacks on slavery in print. While both were slaves who later gained their freedom, their approach to criticizing the institution differed. Much of Phillis Wheatley's condemnation of slavery came in subtle ways, through the use of biblical metaphors and arguments for spiritual equality. While Wheatley's style underwent a marked change in her movement from slavery to freedom, one can certainly sense a difference from the fiery rhetoric Sarter employed. Underlying both of their critiques, however, was the application of the oft-used Puritan exhortation that God would judge America for her sins. Furthermore, the very existence and publication of these authors' work was a spur to white abolitionists and an argument against those who claimed that blacks were mentally and spiritually fit only for slavery.

Phillis Wheatley arrived in Boston aboard the slave ship *Phillis* in 1761. John Wheatley purchased her upon her arrival when she was about eight years old. She turned out to be a prodigy, acquiring a mastery of the English language in a little over a year and, according to her master, learning to read "the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings." Wheatley's mistress Susannah Wheatley was an intensely pious individual, with connections to prominent evangelicals such as George Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon, and she encouraged the education of young Phillis, wanting to raise her as a Christian.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*. ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xiii.

Given Susannah Wheatley's connection to George Whitefield, it is not surprising that the work which launched Phillis into international fame was her poem entitled "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770." This was not Phillis Wheatley's first published poem, however it is the one that made her widely known around the world. In August and September 1770 George Whitefield preached in the Old South Church, Phillis' future home congregation, at least five times. On the last occasion, 3 September 1770, Whitefield reportedly drew about 5,000 listeners. Fifty-eight years old at the time of his visit to Boston, Whitefield did not live to see the end of the month. He died just forty miles north of Boston, in the town of Newburyport, Massachusetts. Wheatley's poem honoring Whitefield's evangelism is an early example of her critiques of slavery and racism through the use of religious metaphors. Part of the poem reads: "Take him, ye *Africans*, he longs for you,/ *Impartial Savior* is his title due:/ Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,/ You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God" [emphasis in original].⁷⁰ Like the later 1773 petitioners, Wheatley referred to Jesus as an impartial savior, claimed the right to salvation for Africans as well as Europeans, and argued against those masters who said it was useless to convert slaves to Christianity. The phrase "redeeming blood" can, and probably did, mean two things for Wheatley. She was referring to the grace of God in saving blacks from their sins. However, as Sondra O'Neale points out in her work on Wheatley and contemporary slave poet Jupiter Hammon, the word "redeem" in the Bible referred to God bringing the Israelites out of captivity, thus when slave poets like Wheatley and Hammon used this word they

⁷⁰ Phillis Wheatley, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770," in *Complete Writings*, 16; For Whitefield's preaching at Old South Church see Hamilton Andrews Hill, *History of the Old South Church, Boston: 1669-1884* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1890), 126; On his death, see Robert E. Cray Jr., "Memorialization and Enshrinement: George Whitefield and Popular Religious Culture, 1770-1850" *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 (1990): 343.

probably had temporal as well as spiritual freedom in mind.⁷¹ The last line of the poem, “you shall be sons and king to God,” is an argument concerning racial equality of blacks with whites, and suggests that Wheatley had a sense of divine justice. She rejected the racial ideologies of the period and argued that Africans would be a great people under the leadership of God.

Advertisements for this poem ran in many newspapers throughout New England. These paid ads included reviews of Wheatley’s work, and sought to connect her to the wider world and undermine proslavery arguments about black mental inferiority. The *Massachusetts Spy* advertised it as the production of “Phillis, a servant girl but seventeen years of age...She has been but nine years in this country from Africa.”⁷² The *New Hampshire Gazette* went a step further, printing an extract of the poem and praising its quality. The paper said “this excellent Piece ought to be preserved for two good Reasons, first in Remembrance of the great and good Man, Mr. Whitefield, and second on Account of its being wrote by a Native of Africa, and yet would have done Honor to a Pope or Shakespeare.”⁷³ Both of these ads highlight the exotic quality of the author, having come from Africa and in the colonies but a few short years. Wheatley would certainly capitalize on this later, as her future publications contain numerous references to the continent and her status as an African. The ads also demonstrate the favorable reception of her work, an important component of her fight against the institution of slavery.

⁷¹ Sondra A. O’Neale, “Challenge to Wheatley’s Critics: ‘There Was No Other Game in Town,’” *The Journal of Negro Education* 54 (1985): 507; Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African-American Literature (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1993), 41-7.

⁷² *The Massachusetts Spy* (Boston, MA), 11 October 1770, 3.

⁷³ *New Hampshire Gazette and Historical Chronicle* (Portsmouth, NH), 19 October 1770, 3.

In addition to making Wheatley known throughout New England, “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770.” connected Wheatley to the strong evangelical tradition in the Atlantic World. George Whitefield had preached in the American colonies since the 1740s, and portraying a familiarity with his doctrines was sure to attract favorable support from other evangelicals. This was in fact what happened; the poem received such favorable praise that Wheatley decided to publish a book of poems. She was unable to find a printer who would do so in the American colonies, but with the assistance of the Countess of Huntingdon, the woman for whom Whitefield worked as a chaplain when in England, Wheatley secured the publication of her book of poetry in 1773 in London. In this compilation, entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, which sold widely in America and Britain, Wheatley published a number of poems reflecting on life, death, virtue, morality, and freedom-- often linking the latter with religious arguments in favor of freedom for blacks from slavery and racism.

One poem that argued for racial equality on religious grounds is “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA.” In this poem Wheatley expressed her happiness at being introduced to the tenets of Christianity through slavery. The first four lines read: “’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too./Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.” She referred to the slave trade as “mercy” because it brought her away from the “pagan” land of Africa. Upon reading these lines, one would think that Wheatley was content with slavery. The last four lines, however, contain another attack of the racial ideology of white colonists. In these lines she wrote “Some view our sable race with scornful eye,/ ‘Their colour is a diabolic die.’/ Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,/ May be refin’d, and join

th'angelic train" [emphasis in original].⁷⁴ Here Wheatley acknowledged the common racism held by whites towards blacks. However, despite blacks' color, and the sinful nature that they share with all humanity, Wheatley argued that they could still receive the gift of grace from God and enter heaven. In her subtle way, Wheatley contended that blacks were the spiritual equals of whites, and her italicization of the word "*Christians*," a word employed at the time as a synonym for whites, indicates she was trying to highlight the hypocrisy of their racist beliefs. Furthermore, Wheatley's writing about and reference to "our sable race," demonstrated a sense of connection to blacks in the American colonies and a commitment to keep issues of race and slavery at the forefront of the public consciousness.

While many of Wheatley's attack on the institution of slavery was necessarily veiled in metaphorical language because of her status as a slave, her tone changed markedly upon receiving her freedom in the fall of 1773. This can be seen most clearly in a letter she wrote to the Native American minister Samson Occom in February 1774, which appeared in the *Connecticut Gazette* on 11 March 1774. Like previous newspapers, the printer decided to insert the letter "as a Specimen of her ingenuity."⁷⁵ In this letter Wheatley advanced a number of arguments against slavery and racism. She said that those who denied blacks their equal rights "cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa."⁷⁶ Here she built upon her earlier argument, claiming that the Christianization of Africa was raising that supposedly "heathen" nation to an equal level with whites, and therefore whites could no longer claim that the slave trade was

⁷⁴ Phillis Wheatley, "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," in *Complete Writings*, 13.

⁷⁵ Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom. *Connecticut Gazette; and the Universal Intelligencer* (New London, CT), 11 March 1774, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

beneficial to Africans. She further argued for black equality with whites, saying that “in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom.”⁷⁷ Her wording here is very similar to that of the April 1773 petitioners, who wrote that “the divine spirit of *freedom*, seems to fire every humane breast.”⁷⁸ After this came the most significant shift in Wheatley’s rhetorical tactics in arguing for abolition. She wrote that the love of freedom implanted by God lives in the hearts of blacks, and is,

impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance...God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honor upon all whose Avarice compels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of the Fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to Convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite.⁷⁹

Here Wheatley was seemingly arguing two main points. First, blacks’ desire for freedom was just as ardent as whites, and they were growing impatient in their state of slavery. This point built off the political rhetoric of earlier black abolitionists, and would show up in future petitions by African Americans in Boston. Second, in writing that God would “get him honor” Wheatley contended that if American colonists continued their hypocritical practice of holding slaves, God would take revenge upon them. This interpretation is supported by her next sentence, in which she says she does not desire God’s getting “him honor” to hurt the colonists, but to teach them a lesson.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773,” 7.

⁷⁹ Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom.

⁸⁰ One definition of “honor” in the Oxford English Dictionary is “a fine sense of and strict allegiance to what is due or right,” which indicates that Wheatley argued that God would get the colonists to strictly adhere to what is right by discontinuing the institution of slavery and the slave trade. See *The Oxford English Dictionary, Volume VII: Hat-Intervacuum* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 357.

Wheatley's shift in rhetoric can be partly attributed to her newfound freedom, which she said her master granted her "at the desire of my friends in England." These friends apparently included abolitionist Granville Sharp, who showed her around London, and the Earl of Dartmouth, who gave her five guineas to acquire some of the works of Alexander Pope. Her willingness to more openly condemn the sins of colonists also evinces the influence of her attendance in Puritan churches, where she undoubtedly heard ministers arguing that colonists must be virtuous in their struggles against Britain, avoiding sin and vice if they were to be successful in the war.⁸¹

Wheatley echoed these same arguments in her 1778 poem "On the Death of General Wooster." She wrote this poem to comfort Wooster's wife and hail his and other revolutionaries' struggle against Britain. However, she could not help but add her commentary on whites fighting for freedom while owning slaves, and the results that would ensue if they continued with this course of action. Her poem asked "how presumptuous shall we hope to find/ Divine acceptance with th' Almighty mind-/While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace/ And hold in bondage Afric's blameless race?"⁸² This argument again claims that God would not support the revolutionaries in their cause against Britain as long as they held slaves, demonstrating Wheatley's ability to adapt whites' arguments for the purposes of blacks. Her letter furthermore indicates the shift her rhetoric took to a more uncompromising stance against slavery in the years after gaining freedom. This shift would have placed her within the black political mainstream in Massachusetts, which was moving towards more open confrontations with masters over the institution of slavery.

⁸¹ Phillis Wheatley to Col. David Worcester, 18 October 1773, *Complete Writings*, 146-7; For Puritan ministers' exhortations towards virtue in the conflict with Britain, see Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 457-66.

⁸² Wheatley, "On the Death of General Wooster" *Complete Writings*, 93.

Phillis Wheatley was so well known, and enough people found her poetry impressive, that even Thomas Jefferson had to contend with her when he developed his proslavery arguments. Perhaps the most powerful of these arguments in the Age of Enlightenment was the claim that blacks were mentally inferior to whites, and thus fit only for slavery. In Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1782, he wrote of blacks: "it appears to me that in memory they are equal to whites; in reason, much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid: and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."⁸³ Jefferson went on to critique Wheatley's work, saying "among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry...Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism."⁸⁴ Jefferson wrote these and other harsh critiques of blacks in an attempt to prove that the two races could not live together in the same society, and since colonizing them outside of the country was impracticable, the best solution was to keep them enslaved.

Despite Jefferson's critique of Wheatley, his writing about her demonstrates that he was familiar with her work and felt it necessary to take the time to denigrate her. This points to the popularity of Wheatley in the colonies and throughout the world, as Jefferson originally wrote the *Notes* for circulation among intellectuals in France.⁸⁵ His essay indicates there were people who believed Wheatley's poetry was evidence of black genius that could flourish under the right circumstances, and as a slaveholder, this would have been threatening

⁸³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782) in *Thomas Jefferson: Basic Writings* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky), 145.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 146.

⁸⁵ Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South, A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 47.

to Jefferson. Thus, he felt it necessary to imply that the “compositions published under her name” may not have been written by her at all. This idea was shared by many at the time Wheatley first published her book, making it necessary for her to prove her ability to produce her own works before a self-styled committee of experts in Boston.

Wheatley felt it was necessary to defend her work before this committee prior to publishing her book because, like Jefferson later would, many questioned her ability to produce the poems in her manuscript. The panel included her master, James Bowdoin, John Hancock, Cotton Mather’s son Samuel Mather, also a Puritan minister, and his cousin Mather Byles. Wheatley passed the test given her by these gentlemen, among others, and she included an attestation in her original book of poetry, which reads in part, “We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl...She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.”⁸⁶ Wheatley’s book and passing this test successfully convinced some of these Founding Fathers that blacks had the ability to produce literature of a high quality.

Although he was not an abolitionist, George Washington was similarly impressed by the power of Wheatley’s intellect. In October 1775 Wheatley wrote a letter and a poem to George Washington. In his reply, Washington wrote that the poem’s “style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetical talents; in honor of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the poem.”⁸⁷ He then said if Wheatley came to Cambridge he would “be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses, and to whom nature has been so

⁸⁶ “To the Publick,” *Complete Writings*, 8; For her trial, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 5-16.

⁸⁷ George Washington to Phillis Wheatley, 28 February 1776, *ibid.*, 37.

liberal and beneficent in her dispensation.””⁸⁸ Washington’s opinion is a far cry from Thomas Jefferson’s argument that Wheatley was not even a poet, and further demonstrates the power of her poetry to influence some people’s minds concerning the mental capacity of African Americans. While Washington was not driven to active support of the abolitionist movement during his lifetime, he did free all of his slaves upon his death.⁸⁹

In addition to her effect on the Founding Fathers, Wheatley seems to have exerted an important influence on white abolitionists, one of whom was Samuel Hopkins, a Puritan minister whose church Phillis attended while vacationing in Rhode Island with the Wheatleys. Samuel Hopkins was born in 1721 in Waterbury, Connecticut. He entered Yale College in 1737, and remained until 1741. Influenced by the spirit of the Great Awakening and ministers such as George Whitefield, whom he heard preach in 1740, Hopkins decided to pursue further study before entering the ministry. He spent the winter of 1741 under the tutelage of Jonathan Edwards, who was by this time perhaps the most prominent theologian in the American colonies. His ideas would have an important influence on Hopkins’s theology in the years to come. Hopkins spent the first twenty-five years of his ministry in Housatonic, Massachusetts, then relocated to Newport, Rhode Island’s First Congregational Church in 1770, where he served until his death in 1803.⁹⁰

Phillis Wheatley developed a relationship with Hopkins in which she most likely influenced some of his antislavery arguments. She visited his church in Newport and

⁸⁸ Ibid, 38.

⁸⁹ Don Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 78.

⁹⁰ Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England Between the Great Awakenings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1981), 1-65; For Jonathan Edwards see Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America’s Evangelical* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).

corresponded with him while she was in Boston. She also had a close friend in Hopkins' church, a black woman named Obour Tanner, with whom she corresponded regularly. After returning from her trip to England Wheatley wrote Hopkins, telling him she was sending seventeen of her books for him to sell, and two more for her friend Obour. She also mentioned her happiness at the educational promise of two free black men about whom Hopkins had written her. He was training these two men, John Quamine and Bristol Yamma, for missionary work in Africa, and regularly kept Wheatley updated on their progress. In a later letter, Wheatley told Hopkins she had printed three hundred more books, and would again like his assistance in selling them.⁹¹

Given the fact that the two corresponded and that Hopkins sold Wheatley's books for her, it is quite likely that Hopkins read her work and incorporated her arguments for abolition into his own. If slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington took the time to read Wheatley, an abolitionist who had her work in his possession could have been expected to do no less. In reading Wheatley's poems, Hopkins would have digested her arguments for the spiritual equality of blacks, and the notion that although God brought blacks out of Africa, and through this method Christianized them, whites were still hypocritical for holding their fellow men in chains. His first antislavery publication, written in 1776, three years after Wheatley published her poems, indicates the influence of this train of thought. He rejected the notion that slavery was a positive means of bringing blacks to Christianity, saying it was "a very great wonder and owing to an extraordinary divine interposition...that any of them should think favorably of Christianity and embrace it."⁹² Even if blacks did embrace Christianity, however, Hopkins argued that Christ commanded Christians "to go and preach

⁹¹ Phillis Wheatley to Samuel Hopkins, 9 February 1774 and 6 May 1774, *Complete Writings*, 151-2, 157-8.

⁹² Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans in Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 403.

the gospel to all nations, to carry the gospel to them, not to go and with violence bring them from their native country.”⁹³

Hopkins’ antislavery argument, crafted three years after the publication of Wheatley’s poems, adopted some of the same themes she highlighted. Her poem “On Being Brought From Africa to America” argued that although slavery brought the gospel to her, racism and bondage were nonetheless sins because they made Christians treat their fellow men as less than human. At the time Hopkins published his first essay in 1776, he had probably also read Wheatley’s published letter to Samson Occom in 1774, in which she argued that God would have revenge against Americans if they continued in their sinful ways. Hopkins employed this same argument in his second known antislavery tract, published in 1793, asking “have we not all reason to fear that the vengeance of heaven will fall upon us, as a people, in ways perhaps which are not now thought of, unless we repent and reform?”⁹⁴ Earlier Wheatley argued that God would hinder the efforts of revolutionaries in their struggle with Britain, and now Hopkins argued that God’s vengeance would fall upon the new republic.

While Wheatley’s writing was significant in that her ideas probably influenced at least one prominent white abolitionist in America, her very existence as a black female poet also constituted an argument against slavery. In his *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson reproduced some of Wheatley’s work as evidence that blacks could write and could write well. He observed of Wheatley “if the authoress was designed for slavery, (as the argument must confess) the greater part of the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Samuel Hopkins, *A Discourse Upon the Slave-Trade, and the Slavery of the Africans* (Providence: J. Carter, 1793), 18.

inhabitants of Britain must lose their claim to freedom.”⁹⁵ The argument he referred to was the same one Jefferson employed concerning blacks’ mental capacity rendering them fit only for slavery. Clarkson’s reply to this argument moved beyond simply contending for blacks’ mental equality, saying Wheatley’s work demonstrated evidence of some blacks’ mental superiority to whites.

Scholars have interpreted Phillis Wheatley in vastly different ways over the years. Some of the first critics of her poetry claimed that she was irrelevant in the fight against slavery. Vernon Loggins, for instance, argued that her work “dwelt at length on the common notions of her day regarding liberty, but she neglected almost entirely her own state of slavery and the miserable oppression of thousands of her race.”⁹⁶ Similarly, Rosey E. Poole claimed that if Wheatley “had had the strength to give all that was really hers, and not that which others had given her, she might have become a really important figure.” Poole argued that Wheatley was content to assimilate into white society rather than attempt to advance the cause of blacks.⁹⁷ While contemporary literary critics such as Sondra O’Neale have turned this interpretation on its head, recognizing that much of Wheatley’s poetry contained implicit attacks on the institution of slavery, historians have been slower to recognize Wheatley’s importance to the early abolitionist movement. She has gone largely unmentioned by scholars of the antislavery movement in the North. In his work on race in the American North, historian John Wood Sweet wrote that Wheatley’s writings focused “more on solace

⁹⁵ Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1785; Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1969), 112.

⁹⁶ Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1964), 24.

⁹⁷ Rosey E. Poole, *Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes* (Lympne and Kent, OH: Hand and Flower Press, 1962), 14.

and comfort rather than outrage and resistance.”⁹⁸ This interpretation does not consider the fact that for a black woman in the eighteenth century, the very act of writing was a form of resistance that challenged social norms. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues, “the act of writing for the slave constituted the act of creating a public, historical self, not only the self of the individual author but also the self, as it were, of the race.”⁹⁹ While Gates wrote this about Frederick Douglass, his insight can be applied with equal facility to Phillis Wheatley, suggesting that Wheatley was never a lone voice in the wilderness, but a representative of all enslaved African Americans.

Another African American who expressed written opposition to slavery in this same period was Caesar Sarter. Not nearly as much is known about Sarter’s life as Wheatley’s. On 17 August 1774, Sarter, a free black man who had been a slave for more than twenty years published an essay with similar arguments to the ones Wheatley employed throughout her work, but in a much harsher tone. He published his essay in a newspaper in Newburyport, a town of 3,600 people. Newburyport was a relatively new town forty miles north of Boston, having split from Newbury, Massachusetts in 1764. Ten years before the split, Newbury had fifty slaves in the town, however census records taken after this point do not indicate how many blacks were in Newburyport when Sarter first published this essay. Given that Newburyport is located on the coast, Sarter may have been a maritime worker, perhaps

⁹⁸ John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 126; Sondra A. O’Neale, “Challenge to Wheatley’s Critics: ‘There Was No Other Game in Town.’”

⁹⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 108.

working as a sailor, carpenter, or rope maker, or he could have been a skilled worker in any number of trades in which black people worked, such as blacksmithing or cutting hair.¹⁰⁰

The essay Sarter wrote in 1774 is his only known publication and has not received any scholarly treatment in the history of abolitionism in Massachusetts. It reflects the growing spirit of radicalism among Massachusetts blacks and their confidence in ideological arguments that would undermine racism and slavery. In the essay Sarter asked how slaveholders could hope to escape divine judgment, exclaiming,

Why, in the name of Heaven, will you suffer such a gross violation of that rule by which your conduct must be tried, in that day, in which you must be held accountable for all your actions, to, that impartial Judge, who hears the groans of the oppressed and who will sooner or later, avenge them of their oppressors!¹⁰¹

While Wheatley's letter to Occom earlier in the same year said God would "get him honor" upon the colonists for slavery, Sarter had no compunction with saying outright that God would avenge blacks for the wrongs perpetrated upon them. He then built his argument for the irrationality of slavery among people who sought freedom for themselves: "Would you desire the preservation of your own liberty?," he asked the colonists. "As the first step let the oppressed Africans be liberated; then, and not till then, may you with confidence and consistency of conduct, look to Heaven for a blessing on your endeavors."¹⁰² Like Wheatley, Sarter argued that God would not assist the colonists in their struggle against Britain unless they stopped enslaving blacks and participating in the slave trade. Furthermore, he rejected proposals for gradual abolition outright in this essay, saying it was not the fault of the slaves,

¹⁰⁰ For census figures see "Number of Negro Slaves in the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay," in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 2nd ser., 3 (Boston: John Eliot, 1815), 95-7 and *Vital Records of Newburyport, Massachusetts: To the End of the Year 1849, Volume I-Births* (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1911), 3; For Sarter's essay see Caesar Sarter, "Address, To Those who are Advocates for holding the Africans in Slavery," *The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet* (Newburyport, MA), 17 August 1774, 1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

who were brought to the colonies against their will, that their masters would lose property. Lastly, Sarter rejected the notion that slavery was a positive good because it Christianized Africans, claiming that blacks were much more likely to become sinners in America than in Africa.

Caesar Sarter's essay bears relation to the New England Puritan tradition of the jeremiad. According to literary scholar Sacvan Bercovitch, the "American Jeremiad was a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal."¹⁰³ This ritual began even before Puritans arrived in the New World. In his *Arbella* sermon, John Winthrop warned his listeners that "if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken...we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going."¹⁰⁴ Winthrop's statement is indicative of the intimate fusion of religion and politics in the eyes of early Puritans, and like many a Puritan minister before him, Sarter reminded his readers that they would be held accountable to God for their actions on earth. Although Sarter has gone unnoticed by scholars of the "black jeremiad," by claiming that God, the "impartial judge," hears the groans of the oppressed slaves and will "sooner or later avenge them of their oppressors," Sarter placed himself squarely within the Puritan tradition of calling for spiritual renewal and a return to America's original promise of being a city on a hill.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), xi.

¹⁰⁴ John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity* in *Reading the American Past*, 59.

¹⁰⁵ Historian David Howard-Pitney's study of the black jeremiad begins with an analysis of the ideology of Frederick Douglass. See *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Wilson Jeremiah Moses does place early black abolitionists such as Richard Allen and Prince Hall within this tradition of black protest, but does not discuss Sarter's essay. See his *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), Ch.3.

Like Wheatley, traces of Sarter's ideology can be found in the later writings of white abolitionists such as Samuel Hopkins and Levi Hart. In a sermon preached one month after the publication of Sarter's essay, Hart told his listeners that slavery was a sin repugnant to both divine law and natural rights, and that the colonists must repent of this sin to be successful in the war.¹⁰⁶ This theme also became a primary argument that Hopkins used in his 1776 antislavery essay when he dismissed the claim that slavery was a positive means of bringing Christianity to Africans, writing that "God goes out of his common way" to bring blacks within the Christian fold.¹⁰⁷

Phillis Wheatley and Caesar Sarter were both important black abolitionists in the revolutionary period. Their work challenged the idea that African Americans were mentally inferior to whites and fit only for slavery by demonstrating the capacity of blacks to write well. Furthermore, the two seemingly influenced white abolitionists' arguments, as Wheatley and Sarter's claims appear in the writings of individuals such as Samuel Hopkins and Levi Hart. Their ideology drew from Puritan religious rhetoric and revolutionary political ideology to critique the practices of white society, and further contributed to the rising spirit of discontent among Massachusetts blacks with the institution of slavery and their willingness to openly attack it.

¹⁰⁶ Levi Hart, *Liberty Described and Recommended in Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 346-7.

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*, 403.

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

The methods employed to finally bring about the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the State of Massachusetts were not novel ones. Slaves and free blacks, as individuals and groups had been attacking slavery since the early eighteenth century. It was not until after the commencement of the American Revolution, however, that their efforts would make a distinguishable difference on the system. Earlier challenges by runaways helped secure freedom for individuals, but did not bring down the whole system. Petitions before the commencement of hostilities with Great Britain were received by the Massachusetts General Court, and were important in bringing together the black community in Boston, but the legislature did not act on them. This failure to act changed when Prince Hall led another petition drive in 1777.

Prince Hall was born in Barbados on 12 September 1748. Originally a slave, Hall was able to purchase his freedom in 1770. Having been relocated to Boston by his master, Hall educated himself and became a lay minister to an informal worship group in Cambridge, a position which made him influential in Boston's black community. He also worked as a leather dresser and caterer and was widely known among whites and blacks as an honest, hard-working leader. His organization of the first all-black American institution in 1775, the African Masonic Lodge, cemented him as the recognized leader of the black community in Boston. In January 1777 Hall led a petition drive to the legislature, in which he argued against slavery on many of the same grounds as previous petitions. Hall wrote "your

Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed on all mankind.”¹⁰⁸ Like the earlier black petitioners in Boston, Hall demonstrated his knowledge of the legal arguments white revolutionaries were using in their fight against Britain, as well as a willingness to employ the rhetoric of Christianity in buttressing his claim. Hall went on to further state “A Life of Slavery Like that of your petitioners Deprived of Every social privilege of Every thing Requisite to Render Life Tolerable is far worse than Nonexistence.”¹⁰⁹ Echoing Patrick Henry’s famous line “Give me liberty or give me death,” the petitioners’ rhetoric can certainly be read as a veiled threat of rebellion, suggesting that if forced to suffer under the harsh yoke of slavery much longer, slaves in Massachusetts might be willing to risk forfeiting their lives to gain their freedom, as thousands of slaves in the southern states were doing at that time.¹¹⁰

In his work on the resistance of subordinate groups, James Scott argues that “the collective insistence, through petitioning, on the ‘rights’ to which subordinate groups feel entitled carries an understood ‘or else’ with the precise consequences of a refusal left to the imagination” of the reader.¹¹¹ In this instance, the “or else” to which Scott refers was probably slave rebellion or aiding the British army, demonstrating the evolution of black antislavery politics and black abolitionists’ ability to adapt their methods to a changing

¹⁰⁸ For Hall’s professions see Charles H. Wesley, *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: The United Supreme Council, 1977), 83 and James Oliver Horton, “Generations of Protest: Black Families and Social Reform in Ante-Bellum Boston,” *The New England Quarterly* 49 (1976):243-245. “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 13 January 1777,” in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ See Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 111-133; Sylvia Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹¹¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 95.

political climate. These petitioners were clearly aware of previous petitions by slaves, “your petitioners have Long and Patiently waited the Evnt of petition after petition By them presented to the Legislative Body of this state,” they wrote.¹¹² Hall and the petitioners ended by asking for a restoration “to the Enjoyments of that which is the Naturel Right of all men,” and demanded immediate emancipation for themselves, and for their children to receive their freedom at twenty-one years old.¹¹³ This time the petition resulted in the introduction of an antislavery bill in the Massachusetts legislature. This was more than previous petitions had achieved. However, the bill was unsuccessful.

Just four years after this petition drive of 1777, two important cases arose in the Massachusetts court system that attacked slavery in a place where it was seemingly more vulnerable. The courts were much more open to challenges to slavery by blacks because in the courts blacks had to convince fewer people that they deserved freedom than they did in the legislature. Also, courts were comprised of local juries, and as was the case with the Worcester Committee of Correspondence, local whites could be much more open to the arguments of slaves than those in the state government.

The first of the 1781 freedom suits involved a woman named Elizabeth Freeman and a man named Brom. Catherine Sedgwick, who employed Freeman after she gained her freedom, said that Freeman, commonly known as Mumbet, sued her master John Ashley for her freedom after hearing the Declaration of Independence. While it is not clear if that was actually the case, it does appear that Mumbet and Brom argued for freedom on constitutional grounds. They brought their case against John Ashley in the Berkshire Court of Common Pleas. Mumbet and Brom’s attorneys were Theodore Sedgwick, future US Senator and

¹¹² “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 13 January 1777,” 10.

¹¹³ Ibid.

abolitionist, and Tapping Reeve. The first step that the attorneys took in the case was to ask for a writ of replevin, “a form of action which lies to regain the possession of personal chattels which have been taken from the plaintiff unlawfully.”¹¹⁴ Unlike most legal actions of this kind, the personal chattels which the plaintiffs hoped to regain were their own bodies. They argued that they were illegally held in slavery, and requested the court to give them control over their own lives and labor, employing a similar argument as the 1774 petitioners, who had written that they “are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever.”¹¹⁵ The court agreed with this line of reasoning, first issuing the writ, and when Ashley refused to honor it, declaring that “the said Brom and Bett are not and were not at the time of the purchase of the original Writ the legal Negro Servants of him the said John Ashley.”¹¹⁶ Both Mumbet and Brom received their freedom and the court fined John Ashley thirty shillings. Ashley immediately appealed the decision, but dropped his appeal in October 1781 and paid his fine. It is not clear why Ashley dropped his appeal, but historian Arthur Zilversmit argues he did so because the Massachusetts Superior Court had ruled slavery unconstitutional just one month before, in the case *Caldwell v. Jennison*, decided in September 1781.¹¹⁷

Caldwell v. Jennison began when the slave Quok Walker ran away from his master Nathaniel Jennison, who had promised Walker his freedom, and went to work for John and Seth Caldwell. Jennison found Walker in his new situation, where he beat him and took him

¹¹⁴ John Bouvier, *Bouvier's Law Dictionary and Concise Encyclopedia* 8th ed. III (Kansas City, Mo: Vernon Law Book Company, 1914), 2890.

¹¹⁵ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 25 May 1774,” 8-9.

¹¹⁶ “Brom and Bett vs. J. Ashley, Esq.” in James M. Rosenthal, “Free Soil in Berkshire County 1781” *The New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 785.

¹¹⁷ Arthur Zilversmit, “Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968): 617-622.

back to his home. Walker then sued Jennison for assault, in effect claiming the right to be secure in his own person, while Jennison sued John Caldwell for enticing away his slave. Walker won his case against Jennison, while Jennison won his case against Caldwell, both in the same court. Jennison and Caldwell both appealed their losses; however Jennison's appeal of the fine for assault and the decision to free Walker was dismissed because his lawyer did not file the correct paperwork. In September 1781, the case *Caldwell v. Jennison* came up and the court overturned the earlier decision, which held John Caldwell liable for damages to Jennison. So after all of the legal wrangling, Quok Walker had successfully sued Nathaniel Jennison for assault, which meant that the court freed him, since slaves could not sue their master for assault. The court had initially made a contradictory ruling when it said John Caldwell was liable to Jennison for the loss of Walker's employment, but the court's overturning this decision supported the decision that granted Walker his freedom. According to Zilversmit, the resolution of these cases decided the legality of slavery in Massachusetts because John Ashley dropped his appeal against Mumbet and Brom one month after hearing the results of the Jennison case, presumably reasoning that since slavery had been declared unconstitutional in the Worcester court, he would lose his case.¹¹⁸

The actions of Walker and Mumbet demonstrated bravery and an intense desire for freedom. According to the 1774 petitioners, slaves in Massachusetts were in constant danger

¹¹⁸ Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," 614-617, 622-624. While Zilversmit argues slavery was abolished in 1781, other scholars claim this did not happen until 1783 when Chief Cushing told the jury in the case *Commonwealth v. Jennison* that "Our Constitution of Government, by which the people of this Commonwealth have solemnly bound themselves, sets out with declaring that all men are born free and equal-and that every subject is entitled to liberty and property-and in short is totally repugnant to the idea of being born slaves. This being the case, I think the idea of slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and the Constitution." What is clear is that one of the Quok Walker cases led to the abolition of slavery. See William Cushing, "Commonwealth v. Jennison, Chief Justice Cushing to the Jury, 1783," in *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 475; See also William O'Brien, "Did the Jennison Case Outlaw Slavery in Massachusetts?" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 17 (1960): 219-241 and Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts".

of being sold to pay their masters' debt.¹¹⁹ Both Walker and Freeman had to know that they were risking separation from any friends and family they may have had, yet they took actions that could have easily resulted in sale had they lost, evincing a commitment to freedom and willingness to risk any comfort and security for the possibility of attaining liberty for themselves, and possibly others.

This newly achieved freedom was still in jeopardy in 1788 when the three members of the black Masons were duped aboard a ship in Boston, taken to the island of Martinique, and sold as slaves. While the court cases of 1781 abolished slavery in the state, blacks were still being kidnapped and Massachusetts residents still participated in the Atlantic slave trade. The petition that Hall presented to the Legislature on 27 February 1788 voiced blacks' fears of being kidnapped and sold into slavery, saying "that maney of us who are good seamen are oblidge to stay at home thru fear and the one help of our time lorter about the streets for want of employ."¹²⁰ Hall argued that in a supposedly free, Christian country blacks were constantly afraid of being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Furthermore, if blacks could not work as seamen, they would be in competition with whites for jobs, thus it was in the legislature's best interests to legislate against future kidnappings. The petition and resulting debate led to the abolition of the slave trade in the state and imposed stiff penalties for those who kidnapped blacks. Governor John Hancock also wrote the governor of Martinique and secured the return of the three men in the summer of 1788.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 25 May 1774," 9.

¹²⁰ "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 27 February 1788," in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 20-1.

¹²¹ Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, 9 March 1788 and 18 April 1788, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th ser., 3 (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1877): 25, 32.

CONCLUSION

Fifteen years from the inception of organized abolitionist activity in Massachusetts, blacks were able to mobilize their community for successful petition drives that led to the abolition of the slave trade in the state, while individuals such as Quok Walker and Mumbet helped abolish slavery through freedom suits. Furthermore, individual writers like Phillis Wheatley and Caesar Sarter, whose works were published in newspapers and books throughout the colonies, helped undermine proslavery ideology and influenced white abolitionists to support blacks in their efforts in attacking slavery. The foundation of blacks' political ideology, and their very ability to participate in public life, lay in Puritan religious ideology and the institution of slavery in Massachusetts that was based on that ideology. The earliest proponents of abolition shared a discourse with which they could attack slavery on the same grounds that masters previously used to justify it. The 1773 petitioners in Boston argued that God "is no respecter of Persons," while Phillis Wheatley employed the same concept in her poem on George Whitefield. The 1774 petitioners pointed out the hypocrisy of their being "stolen from the bosoms of out tender Parents and from a Populous Pleasant and plentiful country and Brought hither to be made slaves for life in a Christian land." Just months later Caesar Sarter asked the colonists how they could possibly look to heaven for a blessing on their endeavors while they held slaves.¹²²

¹²² "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 6 January 1773," 6; "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 25 May 1774," 9.

These connections among black abolitionists in Massachusetts and their efficacy in undermining the institution of slavery suggest that a redefinition of the term abolitionist is in order. No longer can historians assume that the only abolitionists in this period were those who belonged to formal antislavery committees. Furthermore, scholars must reexamine the origins of the nineteenth century abolitionist movement. This study demonstrates that black abolitionism in Massachusetts had a long history, and suggests that many of the people involved in bringing about abolition at the state level continued to work towards ending slavery and the slave trade at the national level by establishing networks and passing on traditions of leadership that became vital to nineteenth century abolitionists. Further scholarship on the nineteenth century abolitionist movement will have to consider the contributions of eighteenth century blacks to adequately portray the origins of widespread antislavery sentiment in the North. Lastly, this study demonstrates that African Americans were significant contributors to the political and intellectual life of the revolutionary era, participating in the important discussions revolving around civil and religious freedom. Blacks' political rhetoric synthesized and reformulated many different strands of thought in early America, especially Puritan religious and natural rights ideology, to counter the arguments of those who tried to subjugate them. Whereas Puritan thinkers like Mather and other slaveholders in Massachusetts imagined an enlightened form of slavery, African American abolitionists in the Age of Enlightenment imagined themselves free and made it so.

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources (Unpublished)

- Henshaw, Joshua to Col. William Henshaw. 2 November 1768. Hugh Hall Papers. Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, Massachusetts.
- Old South Church and Congregation Records (vol.1, 1768-1802). Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, Massachusetts.
- Old South Church Records. The Congregational Library. Boston, Massachusetts.
- Sarter, Caesar. "Address, To Those who are Advocates for holding the Africans in Slavery." *The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet*. Newburyport, MA, 17 August 1774.
- Second Church Record Book (Vol. 4: Baptisms and Admissions, 1689-1716 and Vol.5: Baptisms and Admissions, 1717-1741). Massachusetts Historical Society. Boston, Massachusetts.

Primary Sources (Published)

- A Coppie of the Liberties of the Massachusetts Collonie in New England*. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 3rd ser., 8. Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1843.
- Allen, Richard. *Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. Nashville, TN: Legacy Publishing, 1990.
- Belknap, Jeremy to Ebenezer Hazard, 9 March 1788 and 18 April 1788. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th ser., 3. Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1877.
- Brattle Street Church. *The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square Boston, With Lists of communicants, Baptisms, Marriages, and Funerals: 1699-1872*. Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902.
- Clarkson, Thomas. *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. 1785. Reprint, Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1969.
- Downing, Emmanuel. "Emmanuel Downing to John Winthrop." In *Winthrop Papers, Volume V:1645-1649*. Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1947.
- First Congregational Church. *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868*. Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 39, edited by Richard D. Pierce. Boston: The Society, 1961.

- First Congregational Church. *The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868*. Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 40, edited by Richard D. Pierce. Boston: The Society, 1961.
- Hart, Levi. "Liberty Described and Recommended." 1774. In *Am I Not a Man and a Brother: The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America, 1688-1788*, edited by Roger Bruns, 340-348. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977.
- Hopkins, Samuel. "A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans" 1776. In *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 397-427.
- . *A Discourse Upon the Slave-Trade, and the Slavery of the Africans*. Providence: J. Carter, 1793.
- Jefferson, Thomas. "Notes on the State of Virginia." 1782. In *Thomas Jefferson: Basic Writings*. Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky.
- Mather, Cotton. *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume I: 1681-1709*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957.
- . *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume II: 1709-1724*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957.
- . *A Good Master Well Served*. Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1696.
- . *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, The Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity*. Boston: B. Green, 1706.
- Number of Negro Slaves in the Province of Massachusetts-Bay*. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 2nd ser., 3. Boston: John Eliot, 1815.
- "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature." 6 January 1773. In *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, Volume I: From the Colonial Times Through the Civil War*, edited by Herbert Aptheker, 6-7. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990.
- "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature." 20 April 1773. In *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 7-8.
- "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature." 25 May 1774. In *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 8-9.
- "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature." 13 January 1777. In *A*

Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, 9-10.

"Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature." 27 February 1788. In *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. 20-1.

Sewall, Samuel. "The Selling of Joseph a Memorial." 1700. In *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 10-14.

Trinity Church. *The Records of Trinity Church, Boston: 1728-1830*. Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 46, edited by Andrew Oliver and James Bishop Peabody. Boston: The Society, 1982.

Vital Records of Newburyport, Massachusetts: To the End of the Year 1849, Volume I-Births. Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1911.

Wheatley, Phillis. *Complete Writings*. edited by Vincent Carretta. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.

Willard, Samuel. *A Compleat Body of Divinity*... Boston: B. Green and S. Kneeland, 1726.

Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity." In *Reading the American Past: Selected Historical Documents, Volume 1: To 1877*, edited by Michael Johnson, 56-59. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005.

———. *Winthrop's Journal, 1630-1649: Volume II*. edited by James Kendall Hosmer. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.

Secondary Sources

Aptheker, Herbert. *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.

Bay, Mia. *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

Blanck, Emily. "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts." *The New England Quarterly*. 75. no.1 (2002): 24-51.

Bonomi, Patricia U. *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Conforti, Joseph A. *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the*

Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England Between the Great Awakenings. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1981.

Cray, Jr., Robert E. "Memorialization and Enshrinement: George Whitefield and Popular Religious Culture, 1770-1850" *Journal of the Early Republic*. 10. no. 3 (1990): 339-361.

Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.

———. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975.

———. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Dollar, George William. "The Life and Works of the Reverend Samuel Willard (1640-1707)." *Church History*. 31. no. 2. (1962): 232-3.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction: Volume I*. New York: Random House Inc., 1978.

Frey, Sylvia R. and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Frey, Sylvia R. *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

———. *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003.

Goodell, Jr., Abner C. "John Saffin and His Slave Adam." In *Transactions 1892-94, Vol. 1 of Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 87-112. Boston: The Society, 1895.

Greene, Lorenzo Johnston. *The Negro in Colonial New England*. 1942; New York: Atheneum, 1971.

Gross, Robert A. *The Minutemen and Their World*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

Gura, Philip F. *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2005.

- Hahn, Steven. *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Hancock, Scott. "The Law Will Make You Smart: Legal Consciousness, Rights Rhetoric, and African American Identity Formation in Massachusetts, 1641-1855." PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, 1999.
- Hatch, Nathan O. *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Heimert, Alan. *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Higginbotham, Don. *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002.
- Hill, Hamilton Andrews. *History of the Old South Church, Boston: 1669-1884*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1890.
- Horton, James Oliver. "Generations of Protest: Black Families and Social Reform in Ante-Bellum Boston." *The New England Quarterly*. 49. no.2 (1976): 242-256.
- Howard-Pitney, David. *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.
- Loggins, Vernon. *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1964.
- Lovelace, Richard F. *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1979.
- Lowrie, Ernest Benson. *The Shape of the Puritan Mind: The Thought of Samuel Willard*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974.
- Middlekauf, Robert. *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Miller, Perry. *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1939.
- Moore, George H. *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts*. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866.

- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993.
- Nash, Gary B. *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Newman, Richard S. *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- O' Brien, William. "Did the Jennison Case Outlaw Slavery in Massachusetts?" *The William and Mary Quarterly*. 17. no. 2 (1960): 219-241.
- O'Neale, Sondra A. "Challenge to Wheatley's Critics: 'There Was No Other Game in Town.'" *The Journal of Negro Education*. 54. no.4 (1985): 500-511.
- . *Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African-American Literature*. Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1993.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Pease, Jane H. and William H. *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974.
- Piersen, William D. *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Poole, Rosey E. *Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes*. Lympne and Kent, OH: Hand and Flower Press, 1962.
- Quarles, Benjamin. *Black Abolitionists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- . *The Negro in the American Revolution*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Rael, Patrick. *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Rosenthal, James M. "Free Soil in Berkshire County 1781." *The New England Quarterly*. 10. no. 4 (1937): 781-785.

- Saillant, John. *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Silverman, Kenneth. *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984.
- Smallwood, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Stauffer, John. *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Stout, Harry S. *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Sweet, John Wood. *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- Towner, Lawrence William. *A Good Master Well Served: Masters and Servants in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620-1750*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.
- Wesley, Charles H. *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy*. Washington, D.C.: The United Supreme Council, 1977.
- Wise, Steven M. *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial That Led to the End of Human Slavery*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005.
- Yee, Shirley J. *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992.
- Zilversmit, Arthur. *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- . "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts." *The William and Mary Quarterly*. 25. no. 4 (196